

## What is Quality Learning? By Gwen Gawith

In a recent TC Record article. Fenstermacher and Richardson ask;

“What is quality teaching?

Would we recognise it if we saw it?”

Most teachers would agree with their comment that

“Perhaps we cannot define quality teaching, but we will know it when we see it.”

We all know the warm glow of success we feel after a lesson has really ‘worked’ when students are totally ‘with’ you.

The article goes on to discuss the connection of teaching to learning. This is what interests me because it addresses what I see as the submerged portion of the learning / teaching iceberg – LEARNING.

While no one would seriously question the need for good teaching, the assumption that what we see as good teaching always leads to good learning is simplistic and unsustainable.

Let’s instead look at the submerged portion of the iceberg and ask.

“What is quality teaching?

Would we recognise it if we saw it?”

If we know what quality learning is, surely it will help us to refine our teaching methods and materials to ensure that the relationship between teaching and learning is a cause and effect one.

What is quality learning?

Fenstermacher and Richardson define the factors that contribute to good learning and say, “Note that good teaching is but one of the four ingredients in this mix.”

1. Willingness and effort by the learner
2. A social surround supportive of teaching and learning
3. Opportunity to teach and learn
4. Good teaching

They continue “Just as teaching requires effort, competence and forms of support, so does learning ... Learning does not arise solely on the basis of teaching activity ... it follows that success at learning requires a combination of circumstances well beyond the actions of a teacher... There is currently a considerable policy focus on quality teaching, much of it rooted in the presumption that the improvement of teaching is a key element in improving student learning. We believe that this policy focus rests on a naïve conception of the relationship between teaching and learning.”

I’m sure those behind the lasagne layers of suffocating ‘curriculum statements’ PD in recent years would say that the intention was to improve teachers’ teaching. The cynics amongst us might mutter that it might have more to do with mopping up the mess of an unworkable addictive approach to curriculum development. However, forget the past and all that nonsense. The new draft curriculum addresses more clearly and more economically what we are supposed to teach and makes some suggestions as to how.

We have always been, by world standards, good teachers so it’s time to acknowledge this, stop self-flagellating about our teaching and look at what makes for quality LEARNING. It is inevitable that understanding more about learning will feed back into better teaching, but let learning be the horse leading the teaching cart, not vice versa.

Specifically, we need to consider the first three factors in the list above:

1. Willingness and effort by the learner
2. A social surround supportive of teaching and learning
3. Opportunity to teach and learn

Factors 2 and 3 are fairly well catered for in most New Zealand schools. We all know, and some teachers have experienced, schools that are hostile environments for both teachers and learners and individual classrooms that resemble battlegrounds rather than harmonious social surrounds supportive of teaching and learning. But these are, fortunately, in the minority. Most of us, by this stage in the

term, have established classroom rules and routines for the year and are well on the way to building a 'social surround supportive of teaching and learning.'

So what about number 1 – willingness and effort by the learner? Given that there can be no learning without the participation of the learner, how do we develop the learner's willingness to learn and learning efforts? How do we get students engaged and motivated to learn and how do we keep them engaged and motivated and actually learning as in understanding, remembering, interpreting and applying information to build knowledge?

Willingness and effort by the learner

Fenstermacher and Richardson say:

"An everyday view of what makes teaching good rests, to some extent, on how students react to what the teacher does. We are aware that certain kinds of behaviours and actions by students are indicative of their substantive engagement in what the teacher is doing, and when we observe these behaviours we note that the students are 'with' the teacher. They are engaged, motivated, following, excited, connected, and the many other words we have for describing the ways students participate in lessons. We do not, however, generally wait to assess what the students have learned to decide whether good teaching has occurred ... we do not generally believe that the learner must learn what is taught for the teacher to be well and properly engaged in his or her craft."

The last point is a key one. What's the point in having children engaged and motivated if they are not learning anything (as in remembering, understanding, being able to interpret and apply?) If learning were just about engagement and motivation, we could replace teachers with classrooms full of computers, playstations, cell phones and referees and retire!

When I started my PhD research I asked two simple questions: What does good information literacy look like? What do information literate learners do to learn? I spent a year probing these questions in research literature and a further year probing them with a small group of outstanding New Zealand teachers as they worked with their classes. It took another year of analysis and reading before the patterns became clear, and it was clear that the findings related to all learning not just information literacy.

- a) Good learners (of all ages) and information literate learners were engaged and motivated
- b) Good learners (of all ages) were engaged and motivated to learn precisely because:
  - They knew WHAT they were learning
  - They knew HOW they were going to learn it (could employ strategies)
  - They knew WHY they were learning the particular topic
  - They knew WHEN and WHERE – the learning plan and what they were expected to do as a result.

Ownership and control of learning

The two 'essential ingredients' that emerged from analysing good learners and learning and comparing their practices with those of students who were struggling to find, understand, interpret and apply information on learning tasks were those of ownership and control. Good learners owned the learning and felt they were in control of it.

Ownership of learning was about feeling that the topic was worth learning, that it related to you and your life in some way: that learning it was important or valuable or interesting. Control of the learning was knowing the what, how, why where and when of the learning, as outlined above. It was also knowing that you had the tools for the job.

Knowledge building emerged as a useful analogy. Builders need tools. They need to know what different tools are for, how to use these tools for building what they have to build. Ditto learners.

As my research progressed it became increasingly clear that the 'missing link' of information literacy learning, and by extension, most classroom learning, was that learners simply didn't have the tools for learning. They couldn't explain how they were going to go about the learning and couldn't articulate the required skills or strategies. Many simply didn't own the learning. They waited to be told what to do and how to do it, and had no vocabulary for, or understanding of which tools (skills and strategies) to use for which learning tasks. This, in turn, appeared to compromise their engagement and motivation.

So for my EdD I set about developing and testing a set of tools for learning – not just for the cognitive aspects of learning (comprehension, reading, thinking etc) but also for the aspects embraced by the concept of ownership and control. I'd already taught tools like de Bono's, like Jonassen and Hyerle's tools for learning and Costa's Habits of Mind and innumerable tools for flexible reading, notemaking and questioning. While Costa's Habits of Mind addressed some of the 'missing links' of ownership and control, I wanted tools that helped authenticate the learning for the learners, helped them to visualise what they were going to do and HOW they were going to do it, how they would actually build their knowledge. In short, I wanted tools that were for learners – simple, student friendly, action-based skills/ strategies that helped students to plan and do learning.

Who plans learning?

Planning learning is not the same as lesson planning. 3Doors© learners have tools in their AIM cupboard to help them work with the teacher to design their learning. Together they:

- ~ work out WHAT they will be learning – overview the topic, work out what they already know, work out the gaps in their knowledge.
- ~ work out WHY they are learning that particular topic, its relevance and value to them and their lives and what they might do to apply their knowledge when they have done the learning.
- ~ work out WHERE they will get what they need for the learning and WHEN – the learning plan and the timeframe

Then they open the CLAIM and FRAME cupboard doors to take out the tools for getting and processing the information they need to plug their info gaps and apply their knowledge - the literacy and cognitive tools they need to read, listen, view, understand, analyse, synthesise, organise, interpret, communicate and apply their understandings.

In short, in learners get involved in planning their learning – real involvement, not just token 'We are doing such and such ...' – they will be more engaged and motivated. If they have a set of tools, know what they are for and have lots of guided practice in using them, they will also develop greater self-efficacy, confidence in their ability to learn. With this in place, they will be better able to take advantage of the supportive surrounds and rich opportunities for learning that most teachers and schools provide. My contention is that if we work on Fenstermacher and Richardson's first component of good learning, the other three will fall into place easily.